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## **Annual Report of the Leader of the Council**

Executive Member: Councillor Bill Revans, Leader of the Council and Lead Member for Governance and Communications

Local Member(s) and Division: All

Lead Officers: Alyn Jones, Executive Director for Strategy, Workforce and Localities

### **1. Summary**

- 1.1 As a large unitary Council, we have a diverse range of services and responsibilities, and we are committed to delivering high-quality outcomes for our residents, businesses, and communities. In my report last year, I stated that we had experienced the most remarkable and unique change as we moved to create a unitary Council for Somerset. This year has been no less unique or challenging.
- 1.2 However, we are also operating in a very challenging environment, where the funding for local government has been reduced significantly over the past decade. This has put enormous pressure on our budgets, our staff, and our partners. We have had to make some difficult decisions and find new ways of working to ensure that we can continue to provide essential services and support the most vulnerable in our community.
- 1.3 Despite these challenges, we have not lost sight of our vision and values, and we have continued on our journey to develop and improve as a Council.

### **2. Governance – our approach to continuous improvement**

- 2.1 Another key aspect of developing our Council is to ensure that we have robust and effective governance processes in place, that enable us to make informed and transparent decisions, to manage our risks and performance, and to uphold our ethical standards and accountability. To support us we have carried out a comprehensive review of our governance

arrangements, covering areas such as our constitution, our decision-making structures, our scrutiny and audit functions, our code of conduct, our risk management framework, and our information governance policies.

- 2.2 The Council is required to prepare and keep up to date our constitution containing the standing orders of the Council and such other information as is required or desirable. At its meeting on 22 February 2023, the Council agreed its Constitution to be implemented from vesting day on 1 April 2023. The Council also recognised that a review would be carried out through the Constitution and Governance Committee on areas that they deemed necessary through experience of using the document.
- 2.3 The Constitution and Governance Committee has completed a phased review of key elements of the new Constitution over a series of working group meetings. The areas included were:
- Planning Committee Terms of Reference
  - Licensing and Regulatory Committee Terms of Reference
  - Public Participation
  - Contract Procedure Rules
  - Financial Regulations
- 2.4 At its meeting on 17 April 2024 the Constitution and Governance Committee considered the findings of the different elements of the review and has made recommendations to Full Council accordingly. I would like to thank members of the committee for its diligence and commitment in its work.
- 2.5 Scrutiny is a statutory requirement for all Local Authorities as the Local Government Act (2000). It is the primary opportunity for councillors who are not part of the Council's Executive to play an influential role in the shaping of policy and decisions, that will have a real benefit on behalf of the community they represent. For our Council it is an essential part of ensuring that local government remains transparent and accountable, resulting in improved public policies, services and outcomes.
- 2.6 In February 2023 Somerset County Council considered and agreed a series of recommendations proposed by a cross-party, cross-scrutiny Task and Finish Group, as to how the Scrutiny function would operate after vesting day. One of the recommendations also confirmed that the 5 scrutiny chairs within the Somerset Council structure would conduct a review of the scrutiny function within 12 months of Vesting Day.
- 2.7 In February and March 2024, the 5 scrutiny chairs developed 10 recommendations. The Corporate and Resources Scrutiny Committee

supported them on 25 April 2024, Executive endorsed them on 8 May 2024, and they will go to the Full Council Annual General Meeting on 22 May 2024. These recommendations will help Scrutiny keep playing a key role in Somerset's local democracy, making the council accountable for what it does. Scrutiny lets Councillors check the Council and its partners' performance, policies, and decisions, and suggest how to improve them if needed. scrutiny also lets Councillors talk to the public, stakeholders, and experts, and include their opinions and evidence in the decisions. This way, scrutiny helps make local government better, more open, and more effective, and deliver good results for our communities. I would like to thank members of our Scrutiny Committees, our Chairs and Vice Chairs for their work throughout this year.

2.8 We are committed to good governance and continuous improvement. We will continue to review our constitutional arrangements to make sure they are effective, up to date, and responsive to our stakeholders. As part of this review, I will ensure that there is a clear focus on:

- Simplifying and streamlining our decision-making structures and processes, to ensure that they are efficient, effective, and consistent, and that they support timely and agile responses to emerging issues and opportunities.
- Strengthening and supporting our scrutiny and audit functions, to ensure that they provide robust and constructive challenge, oversight, and assurance, and that they promote learning and improvement across the organisation.
- Enhancing and embedding our risk management framework and our information governance policies, to ensure that they support us to identify, assess, and mitigate our strategic and operational risks.

2.9 These actions will help us to improve our governance processes and outcomes, and to demonstrate our continued commitment to being a transparent and responsible Council.

### **3. Community Engagement – our commitment to listening**

3.1 We recognise that our communities are at the heart of everything we do, and that we need to engage with them effectively and meaningfully, to understand their needs, aspirations, and views, and to involve them in the design and delivery of our services and policies. We also acknowledge that we need to communicate with our communities clearly and consistently, to

inform them about our plans and activities, and to celebrate achievements and successes.

3.2 To achieve these objectives, we have developed and implemented a comprehensive community engagement strategy, which sets out our vision, principles, and methods for engaging with our diverse and dynamic communities. The strategy is based on the following principles:

- We will be inclusive and accessible, ensuring that we reach out and listen to all sections of our communities.
- We will be proactive and responsive, ensuring that we initiate and maintain regular and meaningful dialogue with our communities, and that we respond to their feedback and concerns in a timely and constructive manner
- We will be collaborative and co-produce wherever we can, ensuring that we work with our communities as equal and valued partners, and that we involve them in the co-design and co-delivery of our services and policies, harnessing their skills, knowledge, and assets
- We will be transparent and accountable, ensuring that we explain the purpose and outcomes of our engagement activities, and that we report back on how we have used and acted upon the input and insights from our communities

3.3 One of the most prominent examples of our community engagement approach is our budget consultation, which we conducted in during late 2023 into 2024, to seek the views of our residents, businesses, and stakeholders on our priorities and proposals for the next financial year. The consultation was launched through our website and social media platforms, and was also promoted through our newsletters, press releases, and local media outlets. The consultation included a which asked participants to rate the importance of various service areas, such as education, social care, transport, environment, and culture, and to indicate their preference on the council tax rate. The survey also invited participants to provide any comments or suggestions on how we could improve our services or generate more income or savings.

3.4 The results of the consultation showed that our communities valued all our service areas, but they prioritised social care, education, transport and health and wellbeing. Many of the respondents also indicated that they would support our continued engagement with Government to seek a fairer funding settlement to maintain or improve the quality and accessibility of our services. The comments and suggestions from the consultation

provided us with valuable ideas and perspectives on how we could enhance our service delivery, maximise our efficiency and effectiveness, and explore alternative sources of funding or income generation.

- 3.5 We have used the findings and feedback from the consultation to inform and shape our budget strategy and decisions for the financial year ahead, and to ensure that they reflect and respond to the needs and expectations of our communities. I would like to thank our communities for their participation and contribution, and we have reiterated our commitment to engaging and involving them in our future plans and activities.

#### **4. Working Together - Collaboration and Partnership**

- 4.1 Somerset Council is committed to building a fairer, greener, resilient, more flourishing Somerset that cares for the most vulnerable. We will only achieve this through collective action, and it is now more important than ever to work together with our partners in Somerset and beyond. I am proud of the strides we have made in developing our partnerships with our communities, voluntary, community, social faith and enterprise sector, our health colleagues and importantly the local Council partners.
- 4.2 Over the past year we have signed a unique Memorandum of Understanding with the VCSFE and Health colleagues in the past year. This MoU shows our commitment to working more closely together and gives us the framework to improve our collective performance and collaboration. I understand that as a local authority we need to pay attention to our communities and that actions are more important than words. Change is not immediate and depends on relationships and building trust. I am looking forward to the opportunity that the MoU offers, it is the first step and requires all of us to rethink how we work together.
- 4.3 In addition, we have developed closer working relationships with our City, Town and Parish Council colleagues. We have maintained and developed our dialogue with the sector, progressing asset and service devolution with a number of local Councils. It is clear that we will not be able to continue to deliver all of the services and activities that we do currently. However, we need to increase the pace and, to this end, I am delighted that as part of this year's budget setting process we were able to allocate resources to progress this further and faster. We want to see a proactive and ambitious programme of delegation and devolution. We want to be an organisation that responds to the needs and wishes of its local communities.

- 4.4 We recognise that the devolution of assets and services to a more local level can create a sense of community ownership and facilitate the delivery of stronger, more resilient, and sustainable services. Community led solutions have the potential to achieve better outcomes than centrally administered initiatives.

## **5. Looking Ahead – facing challenges and embracing opportunities**

- 5.1 We have been open and transparent that due to the financial pressures that we face we must adopt an approach to transformation, that will deliver a radically different way of working as a Council, operating with fewer staff, whilst increasing our influence and impact. The Executive has endorsed a new vision for the Council, emphasising a leaner, more productive organisation that embraces digital transformation, innovation and collaboration.
- 5.2 Whilst change will undoubtedly be challenging for our Council it remains my view that we must continue to take all reasonable steps to ensure to create a sustainable Council and it is important that any decisions regarding the future of this Council are made in Somerset. We have engaged with our communities, our stakeholders, and our staff – this will continue. Despite the context we have been working in, we have delivered some outstanding projects and initiatives that have made a positive difference to the lives of our people.
- 5.3 One example of this is one of the most exciting opportunities for Somerset's economy and communities is the Agratas gigafactory development, which aims to create a world-class smart campus for clean growth industries. This project has the potential to generate thousands of high-quality jobs, attract significant investment, and support the transition to a low-carbon economy.
- 5.4 As a Council, we are committed to ensuring that we grasp this opportunity and that we support our communities to secure the benefit from it. We have been working closely with Agratas and other partners to facilitate the planning and development process, to address any challenges or concerns and, to maximise the positive impacts for our region.
- 5.5 We have also been engaging with our residents, businesses, and stakeholders to inform them about the project and to listen to their views and suggestions. We want to ensure that this initiative is not only a catalyst

for economic growth, but also a source of social and environmental benefits to our County.

- 5.6 This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Somerset to become a leader in clean growth and innovation. We are proud to be part of this ambitious vision and we are determined to make it a success for our County.
- 5.7 My view has not changed over the last year, Somerset is a unique and wonderful County and working together, we can enable better outcomes for more of our residents.